

The Yukon Trail

By WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE

An Alaskan Love Story

Copyright, William Macleod Raine.

GENEVIEVE MALLORY, SEEING MACDONALD SLIPPING FROM HER GRASP, TAKES A HAND IN THE GAME

Synopsis.—As a representative of the government Gordon Elliot is on his way to Alaska to investigate coal claims. On the boat he meets and becomes interested in a fellow passenger whom he learns is Sheba O'Neill, also "going in." Colby Macdonald, active head of the land-grabbing syndicate under investigation, comes aboard. Elliot and Macdonald become in a measure friendly. Landing at Kuskak, Elliot finds that old friends of his, Mr. and Mrs. Paget, are the people whom Sheba has come to visit. Mrs. Paget is Sheba's cousin. At dinner Elliot reveals to Macdonald the object of his coming to Alaska. The two men, naturally antagonistic, now also become rivals for the hand of Sheba. Macdonald, foreseeing failure of his financial plans if Elliot learns the facts, sends Selfridge, his right-hand man, to Kamatlak to arrange matters so that Elliot will be deceived as to the true situation. Elliot also leaves for Kamatlak and, wandering from the trail, believes that he faces death. Selfridge, on his arrival at Kamatlak, has his agents abduct Gideon Holt, old-time miner, who knows too much about Macdonald's activities. Elliot wanders into the camp where Holt is held a prisoner. The two men, overpowering the kidnappers, return to Kamatlak, where Elliot learns the truth about the coal land deals. On the way back to Kuskak, Elliot meets a squaw, Metetse, with her child who, Elliot learns, is Macdonald's son. Soon after his return, Elliot learns that Macdonald and Sheba have become engaged.

CHAPTER XI.—Continued.

Presently he spoke thickly. "I suppose you have heard that he was a squaw man."

"That's ridiculous. Don't be absurd, Gordon."

"It's the truth. I've seen the woman. She was pointed out to me."

"By old Gideon Holt, likely," she flashed.

"One could get evidence and show it to Miss O'Neill," he said aloud, to himself rather than to her.

Diane put her point of view before him with heated candor. "You couldn't. Nobody but a cad would rake up old scandals about the man who has beaten him fairly for a woman's love."

"You beg the question. Has he won fairly?"

"Of course he has. Be a good sport, Gordon. Don't kick on the umpire's decision. Play the game."

"That's all very well. But what about her? Am I to sit quiet while she is sacrificed to a code of honor that seems to me rooted in dishonor?"

"She is not being sacrificed. I'm her cousin. I'm very fond of her. And I'd trust her with Colby Macdonald."

"Play fair, Diane. Tell her the truth about this Indian woman and let your cousin decide for herself. You can't do less, can you?"

Mrs. Paget was distinctly annoyed. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Gordon Elliot. You take all the gossip of a crack-brained old idiot for gospel truth just because you want to believe the worst about Mr. Macdonald. Colby Macdonald is too big and too aggressive not to have made hundreds of enemies. His life has been threatened dozens of times. But he pays no attention to it—goes right on building up this country. Yet you'd think he had a cloven hoof to hear some people talk. I've no patience with them."

"The woman's name is Metetse," Gordon said in an even voice, just as if he were answering a question. "She is young and good-looking for an Indian. Her boy is four or five years old. Colmac, they call him, and he looks just like Macdonald."

"People are always tracing resemblances. There's nothing to that. But suppose his life was irregular—years ago. This isn't Boston. It used to be the fringe of civilization. Men did as they pleased in the early days."

"This wasn't in the early days. It was five years ago, when Macdonald was examining the Kamatlak coal field. I'm told he sends a check down the river once a month for the woman."

"All the more credit to him if he does." Diane rose and looked stormily down at her friend. "You're about as broad as a clam, Gordon. Can't you see that even if it's true, all that is done with? It is a part of his past—and it's finished—trodden underfoot. It hasn't a thing to do with Sheba."

"I don't agree with you. A man can't cut loose entirely from his past. It is a part of him—and Macdonald's past isn't good enough for Sheba O'Neill."

Diane tapped her little foot impatiently on the floor. "Do you know many men whose pasts are good enough for their wives? Colby Macdonald is good enough for any woman alive if he loves her enough."

"You don't know him."

"I know him far better than you do. He is the biggest man I know, and now that he is in love with a good woman he'll rise to his chance."

"She ought to be told the truth about Metetse and her boy," he insisted doggedly.

Mrs. Paget lost her temper completely. "Does the government pay you to mind other people's business, Gordon?" she snapped.

"I wouldn't be working for the government then, but for Sheba O'Neill."

"And for Gordon Elliot. You'd be doing underhand work for him too. Don't forget that. You can't do it. You're not that kind of a man. It isn't in you to go muckraking in the past of the man Sheba is going to marry."

Elliot rose and looked across at the blue-ribbed mountains. His square jaw was set when he turned it back toward Diane.

"She isn't going to marry him if I can help it," he said quietly.

He walked out of the gate and down the walk toward his hotel.

A message was waiting for him there from his chief in Seattle. It called him down the river on business.

CHAPTER XII.

Genevieve Mallory Takes a Hand.

Inside of an hour the news of the engagement of Macdonald was all over Kuskak. It was through a telephone receiver that the gossip was buzzed to Mrs. Mallory by a friend who owed her a little stab. The voice of Genevieve Mallory registered faint amusement, but as soon as she had hung up, her face fell into haggard lines. She had staked a year of her waning youth on winning the big mining man of Kuskak, together with all the money that she had been able to scrape up for the campaign outfit. Moreover, she liked him.

Mrs. Mallory sat down in the hall beside the telephone. Her fingers laced about one crossed knee. She knew that if Sheba O'Neill had not come on the scene, Macdonald would have asked her to marry him. He had been moving slowly toward her for months. They understood each other and were at ease together. Between them was a strong physical affinity.

Then Diane Paget had brought in this slim, young cousin of hers and Colby Macdonald had been fascinated by the mystery of her innocent youth. Mrs. Mallory was like steel beneath the soft and indolent surface. Swiftly she mapped her plan of attack. The Alaskan could not be moved, but it might be possible to startle the girl into breaking the engagement.

But before she made any move Mrs. Mallory intended to be sure of her facts. It was like her to go to headquarters for information. She got Macdonald on the wire.

"I've just heard something nice about you. Do tell me it's true," she said, her voice warm with sympathy.

Macdonald laughed with almost boyish embarrassment. "It's true, I reckon."

"I'm so glad. She's a lovely girl. The sweetest thing that ever lived. I'm sure you'll be happy. I always did think you would make a perfect husband. Of course, I'm simply green with envy of her."

Her little ripple of laughter was gay and care-free. The man at the other end of the line never had liked her better. She was a game little sport, he told himself approvingly. It appealed to him immensely that she could take such a facet and come up smiling.

There were no signs of worry wrinkles on her face when the maid admitted a caller half an hour later. Oliver Dustin was the name on the card. He was a remittance man, a tame little parlor pet whose vocation was to fetch and carry for pretty women, and by some odd trick of fate he had sifted into the Northland. Mrs. Mallory had tolerated him rather scornfully, but today she smiled upon him.

Dustin helped himself to a cigarette and made himself comfortable.

She set herself to win him. He was immensely flattered at her awakened interest. When she called him by his first name, he wagged all over like a pleased puppy.

It came to him after a time that she was considering him for a confidential mission. He assured her eagerly that there was no trouble too great for him to take if he could be of any service to her. Their heads were close in whispered talk for a few minutes, at the end of which Dustin left the room with his chin in the air. He was a knight errant in the employ of the most attractive woman north of fifty-three.

When Elliot took the down-river boat he found Oliver Dustin was a fellow passenger. The little man smoked

an occasional cigar with the land agent and aired his views on politics and affairs social. He left the boat at the big bend.

Not till a week later did Elliot return up the river. He was asleep at the time the Sarah passed the big bend, but next morning he discovered that Selfridge and Dustin had come aboard during the night. In the afternoon he came upon a real surprise when he found Metetse and her little boy Colmac seated upon a box on the lower deck where freight for local points was stored.

His guess was that they were local passengers, but what after what slipped behind them and the two still remained on board. They appeared to know nobody else on the Sarah, though once Gordon met Dustin just as he was hurrying away from the Indian woman.

Metetse transferred with the other Kuskak passengers at the river junction. The field agent was not the only one on board who wondered where she was going. Selfridge was consumed with curiosity, and when she and the boy got off at Kuskak, he could restrain himself no longer. Gordon saw Wally talking with her. Metetse showed him an envelope which evidently had an address written upon it, for the little man pointed out to her the direction in which she must go.

Since leaving Kuskak nearly two weeks before, no word had reached Gordon of Sheba. As soon as he had finished dinner at the hotel, he walked out to the Paget house and sent in his card.

Sheba came into the hall to meet him from the living room where she had been sitting with the man she expected to marry next week. She gave a little murmur of pleasure at sight of him and held out both hands.

"I was afraid you weren't going to get back in time. I'm so glad," she told him warmly.

He managed to achieve a smile.

"When is the great day?"

"Next Thursday. Of course we're as busy as can be, but Diane says—"

A ring at the door interrupted her. Sheba stepped forward and let in an Indian woman with a little boy clinging to her hand.

"You Miss O'Neill?" she asked.

"Yes."

From the folds of her shawl she drew a letter. The girl glanced at the address, then opened and read what was written. She looked up, puzzled, first at the comely, flat-footed Indian woman and afterward at the handsome little brown-faced paopoe. She turned to Gordon.

"This letter says I am to ask this woman who is the father of her boy. What does it mean?"

Gordon knew instantly what it meant, though he could not guess who had dealt the blow. The impulse to

spare her pain was stronger in him than the desire that she should know the truth.

"Send her away," he urged. "Don't ask any questions. She has been sent to hurt you."

A fawnlike fear flashed into the startled eyes. "To hurt me?"

"I am afraid so."

"But—why? I have done nobody any harm." She seemed to hold even her breathing in suspense.

"Perhaps some of Macdonald's enemies," he suggested.

And at that there came a star-flash into the soft eyes and a lifted tilt of the chin cut fine as a cameo. She turned proudly to the Indian woman.

"What is it that you have to tell me about this boy's father?"

Metetse began to speak. At the first mention of Macdonald's name, Sheba's eyes dilated. Her smile, her sweet, glad pleasure at Gordon's arrival,

were already gone like the flame of a blown candle. Clearly her heart was a-flutter, in fear of she knew not what. When the Indian woman told how she had first crossed the path of Macdonald, the color flamed into the cheeks of the Irish girl, but as the story progressed, the blood ebbed even from her lips.

With a swift movement of her fingers she flashed on the hall light. Her gaze searched the brown, shiny face of the little chap. She read there an affidavit of the truth of his mother's tale. It was impossible to see him and not recognize Colby Macdonald reincarnated.

"What is your name?" asked Sheba suddenly.

The youngster hung back shyly among the folds of the Indian woman's skirt. "Colmac," he said at last softly.

"Come!" Sheba flung open the door of the living room and ushered them in.

Macdonald, pacing restlessly up and down the room during her absence, pulled up in his stride. He stood frowning at the native woman, then his eyes passed to Elliot and fastened upon him. The face of the Scotsman was grim as that of a hanging judge.

Gordon started to explain, then stopped with a shrug. What was the use? The man would never believe him in the world.

"I'll remember this," the Alaskan promised his rival. There was a cold glitter in his eyes, a sudden flare of the devil that was blood-chilling.

"It's true, then," broke in Sheba. "You're a—squaw man. You belong to this woman."

"Nothing of the kind. That's been ended for years."

"Ended?" Sheba drew Colmac forward by the wrist. "Do you deny that this is your boy?"

The big Alaskan brushed this aside as of no moment. "I dare say he is. Anyhow, I'm paying for his keep. What of it? That's all finished and done with."

"How can it be done with when—when she's the mother of your child, your wife before God?" Standing there straight as an aspen, the beautiful bosom rising and falling quickly while the storm waves beat through her blood, Sheba O'Neill had never made more appeal to the strong, lawless man who desired her for his wife.

"You don't understand." Macdonald's big fists were clenched so savagely that the knuckles stood out white from the brown tan of the flesh. "This is a man's country. It's new—close to nature. What he wants he takes—if he's strong enough. I'm elemental. I—"

"You wanted her—and you took her. Now you want me—and I suppose you'll take me too." Her scornful words had the sting of a whiplash.

"I've lived as all men live who have red blood in them. This woman was an accident. I've been aboveboard. She can't say I ever promised more than I've given. I've kept her and the boy. It's been no secret. If you had asked, I would have told you the whole story."

"Does that excuse you?"

"I don't need any excuse. I'm a man. That's excuse enough. The one big fact you want to set your teeth into now is that I love you, that there isn't another woman on God's earth for me, and that there never will be again."

Her eyes flashed battle. "The one big fact I'm facing is that you have insulted me—that you insult me again when you mention love with that woman and boy in the room. You belong to them—go to them—and leave me alone. I hate the sight of you. Why don't you go—all of you—and leave me in peace?"

It was a cry of bruised pride and wounded love. Elliot touched the Indian woman on the shoulder. Metetse turned stolidly and walked out of the room, still leading Colmac by the hand. The young man followed.

Macdonald closed the door behind them, then strode frowning up and down the room. The fear was growing on him that for all his great driving power he could not shake this slim girl from the view to which she clung. His relation with Metetse had been natural enough. He believed that he had acted very honorably to her. Many a man would have left her in the lurch to take care of the youngster by herself. But he had acknowledged his obligation. He was paying his debt scrupulously, and because of it the story had risen to confront him. He felt that it was an unjust blow of fate.

He knew that he must justify himself before Sheba or lose her. As he stood in the dusk so tall and rigid, he knew her heart was steel to him. Her finely chiseled face had the look of race. Never had the spell of her been more upon him. He crushed back a keen-edged desire to take her supple young body into his arms and kiss her till the scarlet ran into her cheeks like splashes of wine.

"You haven't the proper slant on this, Sheba. Alaska is the last frontier. It's the dropping-off place. You're north of fifty-three."

"Am I north of the Ten Commandments?" she demanded with the inex-

orable judgment of youth. "Did you leave the moral code at home when you came in over the ice?"

He smiled a little. "Morality is the average conduct of the average man at a given time and place. It is based on custom and expediency. The rules made for Drogheda won't fit Dawson or Nome. Metetse does not hold herself disgraced but honored. She counts her boy far superior to the other youngsters of the village, and he is so considered by the tribe. I am told she lords it over her sisters."

A faint flush of anger crept into her cheeks. "Your view of morality puts us on a level with the animals. I will not discuss the subject, if you please."

"We must discuss it. I must get you to see that Metetse and what she stood for in my life have nothing to do with us. They belong to my past. She doesn't exist for either of us—Isn't in any way a part of my present or future."

"She exists for me," answered Sheba listlessly. She felt suddenly old and weary. "But I can't talk about it. Please go. I want to be alone."

Again Macdonald paced restlessly down the room and back. The man



For Answer He Kissed the Red Lips, was one among ten thousand, dominant, virile, every ounce of him strong as tested steel. But he felt as if all his energy were caged.

"Why don't you go?" the girl pleaded. "It's no use to stay."

He stopped in front of her. "I'm going to marry you, Sheba. You're mine."

"No. Never!" she cried. "I'll take the boat and go home first."

"You've promised to marry me. You're going to keep your word and be glad of it all your life."

She shook her head. "No."

"Yes," Macdonald had always shown remarkable restraint with her. He had kissed her seldom, and always with a kind of awe at her young purity. Now he caught her by the shoulders.

The color flamed into her face. She looked hot to the touch, an active volcano ready to erupt. There was an odd feeling in her mind that this big man was a stranger to her.

"Take your hands from me," she ordered.

"Do you think I'm going to give you up now—now, after I've won you—because of a fool scruple in your pretty head? You don't know me. It's too late. I love you—and I'm going to protect both of us from your prudishness."

His arms closed on her and he crushed her to him, looking down hungrily into the dark little face.

"Let me go," she cried fiercely, struggling to free herself.

For answer he kissed the red lips, the flaming cheeks, the angry eyes. Then, coming to his senses, he pushed her from him, turned, and strode heavily from the room.

CHAPTER XIII.

Gordon Buys a Revolver.

Selfridge was not eager to meet his chief, but he knew he must report at once. He stopped at his house only long enough to get into fresh clothes and from there walked down to the office.

It had been the intention of Macdonald to go direct from Sheba to his office, but the explosion brought about by Metetse had sent him out into the hills for a long tramp. He was in a stress of furious emotion, and until he had worked off the edge of it by hard musing, the cramped civilization of the town stifled him.

Hours later he strode into the office of the company. Wally lay asleep in a swivel chair, his fat body sagging and his head fallen sideways in such a way as to emphasize the plump folds of his double chin. His eyes opened. They took in his chief slowly. Then, in a small panic, he jumped to his feet.

"Must 'a' been taking thirty winks," he explained. "Been up nights a good deal."

"What doing?" demanded the Scotsman harshly.

In a hurried attempt to divert the anger of Macdonald, his assistant made a mistake. "Say, Mac! Who do you think came up on the boat with me? I wondered if you knew. Metetse and her kid—"

He stopped. The big man was glaring savagely at him. But Macdonald

said nothing. He waited, and under the compulsion of his forceful silence Wally stumbled on helplessly.

"They got off here. Course I didn't know whether you sent for her or not, so I stopped and kinder gave her the glad hand just to size things up."

"Yes."

"She had the address of Miss O'Neill, that Irish girl staying at the Pagets', the one that came in—"

"Go on," snapped his chief.

"So I directed her how she could get there and—"

Wally found himself lifted from the chair and hammered down into it again. His soft flesh quaked like a jelly. As he stared pop-eyed at the furious face above him, the fat chin of the little man dropped.

"My God, Mac, don't do that!" he whined.

Macdonald wheeled abruptly away, crossed the room in long strides, and came back.

"What's the use?" he said aloud. "You're nothing but a spineless putterer. Haven't you enough sense even to give me a chance to decide for myself? Why didn't you keep the woman with you till you could send for me, you daft monkey?"

"If I had known—"

"D'ye think you've got sense enough to take a plain, straight message as far as the hotel? Because if you have, I've got one to send."

Wally caressed tenderly his bruised flesh. He had a childlike desire to weep, but he was afraid Macdonald would kick him out of the office.

"Course I'll do whatever you say, Mac," he answered humbly.

The Scotch-Canadian brushed the swivel chair and its occupant to one side, drew up another chair in front of the desk, and faced Selfridge squarely. The eyes that blazed at the little man were the grimmest he had ever looked into.

"Go to the hotel and see this man, Elliot alone. Tell him he's gone too far—butt into my affairs once too often. There's not a man alive I'd stand it from. My orders are for him to get out on the next boat. If he's here after that, I'll kill him on sight."

The color ebbed out of the florid face of Wally. He moistened his lips to speak. "Heavens, Mac, you can't do that. He'll go out and report—"

"Let him say what he likes. Put this to him straight: that he and I can't stay in this town—and both of us live."

Wally had lapped up too many highballs in the past ten years to relish this kind of mission. His nerve was gone. He had not the punch any more. Yet Mac was always expecting him to help out with his rough stuff, he reflected fretfully. Take this message, now. There was no sense in it. Selfridge plucked up his courage to say so. "That won't buy us anything but trouble, Mac. In the old days you could put over—"

The little man never guessed how close he came to being flung through the transom over the door, but his instinct warned him to stop. His objection died away in a mumble.

"O' course I'll do whatever you say," he added a second time.

"See you do," advised his chief, an ugly look in his eyes. "Tell him he gets till the next boat. If he's here after that, he'd better go heeled, for I'll shoot on sight wherever we meet."

Selfridge went on his errand with lagging feet. He found Elliot sitting moodily alone on the porch of the hotel.

In Gordon's pocket there was a note to Macdonald explaining that he had nothing to do with the coming of Metetse. He had expected to send it by the hotel porter that evening, but the curt order to leave town filled him with a chill anger. The dictator of affairs at Kuskak might think what he pleased for all the explanation he would get from him.

"Tell your master I don't take orders from him," he told Wally quietly. "I'll stay till my work here is done." They had moved a few yards down the street. Now Gordon turned, lean-lined and active, and trod with crisp, confident step back to the hotel. He had said all that was necessary to say.

Two men standing on the porch nodded a good evening to him. Gordon, about to pass, glanced at them again. They were Northrup and Trelawney, two of the miners who had had trouble with Macdonald on the boat.

On impulse he stopped. "Found work yet?" he asked.

"Found a job and lost it again," Northrup answered sullenly.

"Too bad."

"Macdonald passed the word along that we weren't to get work. So our boss fired us. The whole district is closed to us. We been blacklisted," explained Trelawney.

"And we're busted," added his mate.

Elliot was always free-handed. Perhaps he felt just now unusually sympathetic toward these victims of the high-handed methods of Macdonald. From his pocket he took a small leather purse and gave a piece of gold to each of them.

"Just as a loan to carry you for a couple of days till you get something to do," he suggested.

Northrup demurred, but after a little pressing accepted the accommodation.

"I pay you soon back," he promised. Trelawney laughed recklessly. He had been drinking.

"You bet. Me too."

Elliot finds himself in a serious predicament as a result of a remarkable chain of circumstances which seem to convict him. These circumstances are related in the next installment.

(TO BE CONTINUED)